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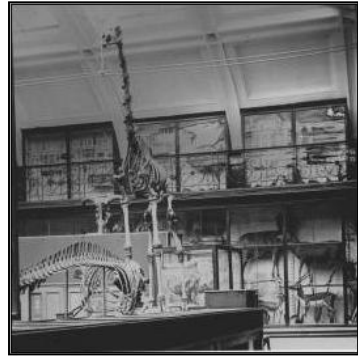
Leeds Collections on Display

Jen Kaines, Registrar, Museums and Galleries, Leeds City Council

Natural History Collections on display have a long history in Leeds. The origins of the City Museum can be traced back into the 1770s, but the first purpose built Museum was opened in this fabulous building in 1821 on Park Row by the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society.



City Museum on Park Row



Park Row Displays

The Collections were in main natural history, with some archaeology and a very little anthropology. Many of the specimens from that Museum are still on display today. This was very much the age of the keen gentleman naturalist, although the first professional curator was appointed to the Museum in 1825. There were strong links with the other major institution of the time in Leeds, the hospital. One of the surgeons in fact carried out an examination on the newly acquired Egyptian mummy in 1828.

The displays were traditional type, very specimen rich and a mixture of skeletal, mounted and preserved specimens. The Museum was extended in the 1860s and the quality and quantity of the collections expanded to form the basis of the Designated Natural History collections Leeds Museums and Galleries holds today. The Museum continued until 1941 when it was badly bombed, and many valuable specimens were completely destroyed, according to eyewitnesses mummy remains were blown onto the street by the force of the bomb. Part of the original building was demolished and the rest was heavily shored up with a cement-rendered wall. Even so it enjoyed a huge post war renaissance, with such successful activities as a Saturday children's club.



1941 Bomb damage to City Museum on Park Row

1966 Collections move



The Museum 'made-do' with its building into the 1966 when it was closed for Health and Safety reasons, (a theme that reoccurs later in the history of Leeds City Museum), and after lengthy negotiations the Museum occupied the first floor of the library, now in the municipal buildings from 1969. As the building space available was quite small temporary exhibitions were often held in other buildings in central Leeds such as the former Midland Bank. This was far from ideal and planning for a new Museum was never off the agenda, but really kicked off in earnest in 1999 following the enforced closure of the museum in the library by the Fire Officer, due to fire risk. The collections were then moved to our site at Yeadon and the concept of accessible storage was tried for the first time in Leeds.

A site for the new Museum was identified in the Mechanics Institute on Millennium Square, with the theatre moving out to a purpose built venue. This is right in the centre of Leeds, a fabulous location for a Museum, but not practicable for a storage facility given space constraints of the historic building and the value of that land. So plans for a separate storage facility entered the equation at that point. The bid for a Museum conversion and a purpose built store was successful. Heritage Lottery being the major funder for this project, with other funds coming from the City Council and a variety of other funding bodies.

The new Museum then, will be primarily display space only, there are only a very few back of house areas, and no collections storage on site at all/ The plan for the galleries is to draw on the fantastic collections held by Leeds Museums and Galleries, which we have not had the opportunity in recent years to display to their full potential. The curators have chosen themes around the collections using our existing collections, we have not collected specifically for these displays, but see it as an opportunity to showcase some of our collections. The new Museum is due to open late summer 2008, and we all look forward to seeing the new displays in all their glory.

Obviously storage of the collections not to be displayed in the new Museum was a major consideration, in fact the second part of this City Museum Project. The site at Yeadon had been successfully operating as an 'open store' facility and it seemed ideal to expand this concept to include our other remote store, which Leeds had been 'temporarily' occupying for about 20 years in the city centre, our store at Sovereign Street. Sovereign Street Stores was a five floor old leather warehouse with a lift dating back to the 1930s, no access that did not involve steps and a fire limit of 20 people, which meant we were never going to be able to open it to the public. Plans therefore for this new facility would need to take the millions of specimens, including anthropology, archaeology, arms and armour, botany, conchology, entomology, zoology, geology, numismatics, social history, costume and textile collections. A site was identified in an area of Leeds near Royal Armouries and building work commenced in 2004.

The plan was for collections, to be fully accessible, although on racks and perhaps traditionally thought of as in storage being much more on open display in a less conventional manner than in a museum environment. When I arrived in post in Leeds at the end of April 2005 the task of packing the collections and creating a basic inventory from summer 2005, but with work taking priority for the Service from January 2006. Leeds Museums Discovery Centre, as we are calling this new facility was handed over to us in October 2006 and we commenced the move of collections from our Sovereign Street Stores in November, completing this phase at the end of March 2007.

The collections were moved by specialist professional contractors, overseen by Registrar team. During the pack and move we have started to rationalise the collections, working on the larger items initially before moving them so maximising resources. The rationalisation considers a number of factors: condition, provenance, duplication, potential use and display. We are carefully considering each item and working through due process. This rationalisation is continuing across the collections. The aim of this new facility is to provide access to the collections and the best storage conditions for them. The building is basically divided into two main sections in its design, the ancillary block consisting of visitor and staff facilities and the storage block.

The ancillary block has two floors, the first for visitors and second for staff. Upstairs there is a large open plan office for curatorial, registrar, education and admin staff, a staff room, and a meeting room. On the first floor there is a large reception area, commercial store and office for the whole Service, a large education space that can be used as one room or two, and a small research room and curatorial library, with the other usual facilities such as toilets, baby change, first aid room, etc.



Leeds Museums Discovery Centre

The storage block is extremely functional, basically a large extremely secure concrete box, with full environment control set for objects, not necessarily for the comfort of staff and visitors. The store was designed to provide maximum visual impact and accessibility in one space, and for us to be able to easily get objects out for researchers, school groups, community groups, in fact any potential user.

Access is controlled through security fob for both entrance and exit, and no member of the public will be allowed unaccompanied in the storage block. The majority of the collections are stored in this large Store 1 at 16°C and 50% RH, light being controlled by movement sensors. There are a small number of collections not included in this main block, the decision to remove these to discreet areas was only undertaken after detailed risk analysis. We have a separate store for Spirit Collections, comprising of vented cabinets with plasticized shelves, another highly secure restricted access store for our fire arms and numismatics, and a photographic store. These smaller stores are held at more appropriate temperature and relative humidity for these collections, and will be restricted access to members of the public. We have a Conservation Studio and quarantine room, with a freezer large enough to take the Yak.

To maximise space in the store the full height of 4metres is used wherever possible and roller racking is also used, for paintings, boxed items and adapted racking to accommodate our bespoke molluscs system. The central area and end bays are racked with static racking to showcase some of our items, which will be on rotation. Our costume collection is hung in static wardrobes along one wall. Currently this central area is very much work in progress, with the first theme of the displays yet to be finalised before the completion of the moves of natural history objects from our store at Yeadon.

Collections are therefore not stored as previously in separate discreet aras or rooms, but rather next to each other in racks, again to primarily maximise space but also to break down some of the traditional ideas about divisions of collections and collecting as separate areas. For example one of our first displays on the picture racking will be African spears, linking in with the 'Out of Africa' gallery at the new Museum, which will be on racks next to our social historical paintings; more practically geology is stored on the roller racking from ground to 2m and social history toys and games occupies 2 to 4m. Curators therefore will be working much more closely together, if only because there are only a limited number of aisle-ways that can be put in the roller racking at any one time, but on a more serious note we do have a number of projects that are cross curricula in the pipeline and are looking at interventions and installation type displays within the store.

Leeds Museums Discovery Centre is opening to the public this summer and groups are welcome to book the facility to have a general tour, access the collections, for education, activities, or simply use the conference and meeting facilities. Further details of the programme and activities will be launched in July at the opening. We are all very much looking forward to working and developing our ideas for the building and use of the collections at the Discovery Centre, and very much look forward to the opening of the new Museum next year. However we are not resting there and are looking to the future for more collections to be on display.

We are currently working on a plan and a bid for funding to build another Discovery Centre type building next to it as a mirror image, this time in partnership with the West Yorkshire Archive Service to open a joint facility for accessing archives, paper, print and photographic material, so watch this space.

If any one would like further information or to book a visit to the Leeds Museums Discovery Centre then please contact Jen Kaines (jen.kaines@leeds.gov.uk).